

‘Base Ball’ in Kalamazoo (Before 1890)

“Hip, Hip... *Huzzah!*”

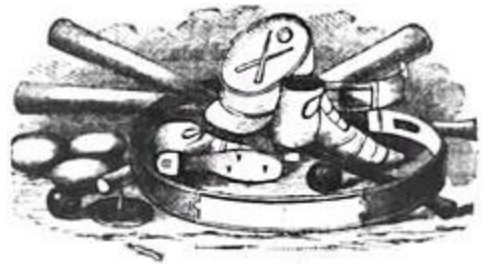
If you’re under the impression that Kalamazoo has only recently become involved in the sport of professional and semi-professional baseball, think again. Our community’s love affair with America’s favorite pastime dates back to the days before the Civil War when the town itself was little more than a frontier village, and the passion of local fans has seldom wavered since.

“Baseball is the hurrah game of the republic! It’s our game: America’s game: has the snap, go, fling, of the American atmosphere—belongs as much to our institutions, fits into them as significantly, as our constitutions, laws: is just as important in the sum total of our historic life.”

—Walt Whitman, 7 April 1889

America’s Game

The game of Base Ball (then two words) originated in the 1840s, and was (and still is) a uniquely American sport. In its infancy, baseball was very much a gentleman’s game, where runs were called “tallies,” outs were “kills,” and the batter (“striker”) had the right to say how the ball (then tossed underhand) should be pitched. According to author and MLB historian John Thorn, “It was thought unmanly to not catch with bare hands,” so no gloves were worn, and if a ball was hit into the grandstand, it was to be thrown back onto the playing field. Umpires (then “referees”) enforced strict rules of conduct, and players (“base ballists”) could be fined for such ungentlemanly conduct as swearing, spitting, disputing a referee’s decision, or failing to tip one’s hat to a feminine spectator. Admission prices were inflated to keep out the “undesirables,” and the use of alcohol and tobacco was strictly prohibited.



Kalamazoo Telegraph, 2 October 1867

The “New Game” Comes to Kalamazoo

Legend has it that the sport of baseball as we know it was first introduced in Kalamazoo during the late 1850s by one John McCord, who, after seeing the game played while attending school in New York, was finally able to persuade his friends back home in Kalamazoo to try it. “John used to play the old game of patch ball with us when he was here,” recalled Kalamazoo’s Civil War era catcher Jerome Trowbridge, “but he went down to Poughkeepsie to school and when he came back to Kalamazoo he told us of the other game and prevailed upon us to try it. We tried it and were thoroughly disgusted with the whole

thing and wanted to go back to the old game, but John kept telling us that this would soon be the only game that would be played and he was right” (*Gazette*). John McCord would in fact lead Kalamazoo’s early baseball teams for more than a decade.

Village treasurer Oscar Coleman remembered organizing Kalamazoo’s first community baseball team sometime before the Civil War, probably about 1858. As Coleman later recalled, he met one afternoon with Judge W.W. Peck and others at Cummings’ Cigar Store on South Burdick Street and established the then unnamed club.

By the spring of 1859, there was at least one “official” baseball club in Kalamazoo (most likely Coleman’s), and according to the *Kalamazoo Telegraph*, there was “plenty of material for a dozen more.” The team’s first out-of-town opponents were from Galesburg and Schoolcraft, but clubs from Augusta, Barry County, and elsewhere soon followed. “At the time we started to play the new game,” Trowbridge recounted, “there were but three teams in the west who played as we did. There was a team in Chicago, one at Jackson and one at Rockford, Illinois. It was not long, however, until there were plenty of such teams all over the state.”



Oscar F. Coleman, c.1901

The Champion Base Ball Club (1860)

By 1860, the Kalamazoo baseball team had become an organized body of twenty-five individuals known as the Champion Base Ball Club. The team roster included John McCord, Jerome Trowbridge, and Judge Peck, plus Ira C. Tuttle, J.M. Robinson, William (J.) Doody, C.K. Tuttle, S.R. Wheeler, M.A. Allen, F. Burlingham, Sheriff William E. White, H. White, A. Stevens, J.P. Cadman, H.L. Church, G.N. Ives, O.H. Brusie, B. Seeley, Clark L. Mott, William G. Howard, P. Ranney, J.B. Judson, G.D. Penfield, and George Fish. Champion Club officers for 1860 were (team captain) A.H. Randall, C.C. Dolloway, H.M. Brown, and George Dodge.

Friends and fans gathered at the “new grounds” on North Burdick Street to watch the Champions take on rivals from nearby Galesburg and Schoolcraft. More often, however, the Champion club would split in two with the “married men” taking on the “single,” and many times the battles would end with the losing team buying supper for all back downtown at the Burdick House. “They had to play hard to win,” remembered Trowbridge, “and they deserved a good meal.”



Kal. Telegraph, 21 July 1876

Base Ball Goods

It wasn't long before the latest in baseball supplies and regalia could be had locally for those who were ready to attempt the new sport for themselves. Hall & Scales offered a broad selection of bats, bases, spikes, shoes, caps, balls, belts, flags, score books, instruction books, and "uniforms made to order." "New National" and "New York Regulation" balls were \$1.25 to \$2 each at the Roberts & Hillhouse store on Main Street, while Shakespeare & Sleeper advertised several additional brands of balls, including "Atlantics," "Red Stockings," "Bounding," "Rook," "Star," "Young America," "White Dead," and "Red Dead." Hardwood bats "from 35 to 40 inches in length" were packaged and sold by the dozen.

Kalamazoo Base Ball Clubs (1866-67)

By the end of the Civil War, baseball had already earned its title as "Our National Game." Mid-1860s teams in Kalamazoo included the Burr Oaks and the Excelsior Base Ball Club (both named for the local fire departments), the Gymnastic Club (later called Mount Carmel), plus John McCord's Continental Base Ball Club, considered "the champions of Western Michigan" (*Kalamazoo Telegraph*). The Continentals went undefeated in 1866 with an astonishing 355 runs in 7 matches. The Burr Oaks, led by team captain George Scales, went 5 games for a total of 232 runs the same year.

Continental	Burr Oak	Mt. Carmel	Excelsior
J. McCord (cap.)	G. Scales (cap.)	Howard (cap.)	E.R. Burrell (pres.)
Neal Ball	E.C. Parsons (pres.)	Benedict	H. Wells (v.p.)
T.R. Barrett	G.C. Winslow (v.p.)	Beckwith	W.C. Hoyt (sec.)
F. Burlingham	T. Selkrig (sec.)	Blackman	L.H. Grimes (tr.)
W.S. Crane	A.W. Allen (tr.)	Burt	W.E. Neahr (dir., cap.)
W. Everett	D. Balch	Colman	C.G. Bostwick (dir., cap.)
C. Phelps	M. Cahill	Dunning	A. Henry (dir.)
A. Randall	C. Cahill	Eaton	
Geo. Robinson	O. Freeman	Fish	
J. Trowbridge	C.S. Fraser	Gilpatrick	
E. White	E.B. Linsey	Porter	
	C.D. Loomis	Sacle	
	H. Rathborne	Signor	
	R. Smith	Trisket	
	C.D. Sweetland (dir.)	Walden	
	C. Rice (dir.)		

“The game is attaining a fever heat in the East. Thousands of spectators flock to the grounds on the event of a match of importance. Large sums of money change hands. In the language of one of the ‘professionals’ it being ‘a great game to bet on, sir; you see it’s so uncertain!’”

—*Kalamazoo Telegraph*, 26 September 1866

The Una Base Ball Club (1868)

In May 1868, the Continental team was reorganized as the Una Base Ball Club of Kalamazoo, a name perhaps derived from the famous Una clubs of Mt. Vernon and Jersey City. The Kalamazoo Unas first took on local “junior nines” such as the Unions, the Olympics, the Wickedes, the Tinnies, the Experts, and the White Stockings in the open lots at the west end of Cedar Street. Before long, however, the Unas were playing weekly games against rival teams from Plainwell to Chicago, and attracting large crowds in the field opposite the National Driving Park (National Fair Grounds) off Portage Street in today’s Edison Neighborhood.

“On Nov. 3rd, the Mount Carmel (formerly Gymnastic) and Burr Oak Clubs played a game for the purpose of testing their relative strength and closing play for the season. The Burrs made their success certain by a score of 15 in the first inning. Gentlemanly conduct characterized the play of both sides during the entire game. No fault was found with the Umpire’s decisions.”

—*Kalamazoo Telegraph*, 21 November 1866

Kalamazoo vs. Chicago

By 1872, the Una Base Ball Club of Kalamazoo, still under the skilled guidance of team captain Johnny McCord, had indeed become a force to be reckoned with. With McCord at shortstop, Judge “Old Ez” White at third base, Tremaine (“undeniably one of the heaviest batters in the country” —*Kalamazoo Telegraph*) at second, Lee Waterbury at first, Will Sergeant and John Holtenhouse in left field, George Wheelock and Charlie Rice in center field, Jerome Trowbridge and Dorr Hart in right field, William Denoyer catching, and Thomas “Tommy” Dorgan pitching, the Unas were as good as or better than any team around, and had sights set far beyond southwestern Michigan.

During Kalamazoo’s 1872 Fourth of July celebration, the Unas took on the Chicago Liberties, “the second best club in that city” (*Gazette*), in an exciting match at the National Driving Park. (The game was called after just six innings at Chicago’s request; seems the Liberties had had enough.) The *Kalamazoo Telegraph* praised McCord after the game, saying he “worked his men with cool judgment and a clear grasp of the situation.” According to the *Kalamazoo Gazette*, “McCord, the captain of the Unas, is deserving of praise for working his men so carefully and with good results. White, Tremaine, Waterbury and Hart, and all ‘the boys,’ played well, and they showed themselves to be good ball-tossers.” The Kalamazoo community could not have been more proud.

Kalamazoo vs.Detroit

On Monday afternoon, 15 July 1872, Denoyer, Dorgan, McCord, Waterbury, Tremaine, White, Hart, Wheelock, Sergeant, and Everett all boarded an eastbound train at the Kalamazoo station, with their ultimate destination being the Woodward Avenue cricket grounds in Detroit. The *Kalamazoo Telegraph* had sung the Unas' praises after the game against Chicago, calling the team "a first-class amateur base ball organization, one that we consider next to, if not the best in the State." But "next to the best," it seems, was just not good enough for the Unas. Emboldened by the victory over Chicago, the Unas then challenged Michigan's leading team, the Detroit Empires, to a mid-summer series "for the championship of the State."

"The Una Base Ball Club have challenged the Detroit club to a home and home match for the championship of the State, the first game of the series to be played at Detroit, the second in this place, and if the third game is necessitated the place of encounter is to be agreed upon by the respective clubs at the conclusion of the game played here. We trust the Unas may be successful in this their first contest for the silver cup."

—*Kalamazoo Gazette*, 11 June 1872

In what turned out to be a disappointing journey for the Kalamazoo team, the Detroit Empires "whitewashed" (*Gazette*) the Unas by a score of 36-14 in the first game. "The odds were altogether in favor of the visiting club," wrote the *Detroit Free Press*, "and they were confident of winning, but they were outplayed at every point." Still, the *Detroit Tribune* applauded the Kalamazoo team members for their efforts, describing the Unas as "the crack club of Kalamazoo... an athletic body of men [that] possess good capacity as catchers and batters." The Detroit team visited Kalamazoo in September for a rematch, but that game was called off after three innings due to rain—unfortunate for the Unas, since they were leading Detroit at the time by a score of 11 to 7.

The 'Unas' Become 'The Kalamazoos' (1875)

Following two years of seemingly sporadic play, the Una club was reorganized in August 1875 and renamed the Kalamazoos, thereby becoming the first of many Kalamazoo teams to be officially named after its hometown. To help guide the team, a governing body called the Kalamazoo Base Ball Association was formed, which included former village president Judge Allen Potter as president; A.M. Ransom, secretary; and John McKee, treasurer. Rounding out the board of directors were James A. Sweet, D. Goodlander, C.D. Sweetland, and John L. McCord.

On 24 August 1875, an historic exhibition game was arranged at the National Driving Park in Kalamazoo, pitting the Kalamazoo nine against manager Harry Wright's "world champion" Boston Red Stockings. Kalamazoo's roster was made up of locals, "though among the best players in the state" (*Gazette*); Myers, Gillespie, McCord, Dorgan, Webster, Terwilliger, Mason, DeMyer and Rawlson. Boston's roster that day included future Hall of Famers Harry and George Wright, plus the league's top three batters

that year; catcher Deacon White, second baseman Ross Barnes, and first baseman Cal McVey. Although the Bostons beat Kalamazoo by a score of 11-6, the visitors called the Kalamazoo team “the best amateur club they [had] met, and better than some who style themselves professionals” (*Gazette*).

During the weeks that followed, the Grand Rapids Democrat labeled the Kalamazoo team “the champion club of Michigan” after decided victories over the Charlotte Foresters, the Jackson Mutuals, and the Toronto Tecumsehs, while the Boston team went on to claim its fourth consecutive National Association championship before joining the new National League the following spring.

Kalamazoo Monitors (1875)

By the time America’s centennial rolled around, the sport of baseball had become immensely popular. New game rules took effect in 1876, which mandated that balls should be of a specific size and weight (and must be marked as such), bats were to be round, and umpires were to have full control of the game and the players.

Formed about mid-year in 1875, a new Kalamazoo “junior” nine called the Monitors created a stir when they took the “silver cup” award at an August tournament in Vicksburg by solidly defeating the “Hungry Nine” from Vicksburg and the Mendon second nine. The Monitors team is especially noteworthy because it introduced several young new players, including two who would later become instrumental in the continuing success of professional baseball in Kalamazoo. Monitor first baseman William “Bill” Doyle was to become a successful local developer, while team captain and third baseman Oliver “Ollie” Hungerford would eventually lead one of Kalamazoo’s finest professional teams to its first state title. Eventually, these same two men would be responsible for establishing Kalamazoo’s first proper baseball field. During the 1876 centennial season, however, the young Monitors were only just beginning to earn the respect of their peers, as they cleaned up against rival clubs from Augusta, Plainwell, Vicksburg, and Sturgis.

“A game of base ball was played last week at Kalamazoo between the “Fats” and the “Leans” the Leans winning by 68 to 25. Long-Six Wallace White, we notice, was one of the Leans. There was great fun in the affair.”

—*The (Otsego) Weekly Union*, 29 October 1875

“The Great John McCord”

Born in New York about 1844, John L. “Johnny” McCord was long considered the “founding father” of baseball in Kalamazoo. McCord probably arrived in West Michigan during the 1850s, then traveled to Poughkeepsie to attend school where he was introduced to the new game. After returning to Michigan, McCord worked in Augusta as a livery stable keeper and constable during the 1860s, and helped to organize the Augusta baseball club there, plus the Champion and the Continental clubs in Kalamazoo. By

the end of the decade, McCord owned a large farm in Ross Township and had become the proprietor of the Augusta Hotel at the corner of (then) Fulton and Canal streets, yet he still managed to travel often to and from Kalamazoo to work with his teams, including the mighty Unas.

One of McCord's former teammates, Una outfielder Charlie Rice, recalled a time when McCord made a key play for Kalamazoo in a game against Grand Rapids, described by Rice as "one of the most exciting games ever played." According to Rice, the Grand Rapids team was ahead by three runs in the bottom of the last inning, and Kalamazoo was at bat with two outs. "We finally got two men on the bases," Rice recalled, "and one of our players, I don't remember who it was, got up to bat and hit a little one and got to first base on it. The Grand Rapids crowd was going wild." With two outs and the bases loaded, it was John McCord's turn at bat. "John was another sure hitter," Rice continued, "and he stepped up to bat and the first ball that came through he hit it an awful whack and broke his bat square in two, but the ball went way out beyond the fielder and John brought in the three men and made a home run himself." Kalamazoo won the game, but evidently one of the local newspapers was not as complimentary of Kalamazoo's hard fought victory as McCord would have liked. "John McCord was so mad," said Rice, "that he was going right down to kick the editor."

John McCord led the Kalamazoo Unas for several years until the 1875 reorganization, then continued as a Kalamazoo Base Ball Association board member for a brief period after. During the latter part of the 1870s, McCord occasionally reconvened the "old Unas" for an exhibition game or two in Kalamazoo against other local teams, usually to benefit a charitable cause. McCord eventually sold his hotel in Augusta and moved his family to Sacramento, California, where he sought his fortune as a horse trader. Johnny McCord was a highly regarded member of the local community, and was fondly remembered by his friends in Kalamazoo for years after his departure.

"Walter's news stand is crowded every evening with persons desiring to read the reports of the day's games, base ball forms the chief topic of conversation and the present intensity of the base ball fever, which was never greater in Kalamazoo, augurs well for the success of the new enterprise."

—*Kalamazoo Daily Telegraph*, 9 June 1886

A Successful New Enterprise (1886)

During the early spring months of 1886, a new Kalamazoo Base Ball Association was organized, with \$5,000 capital stock and a mission "to maintain and conduct a base ball club for the encouragement of athletic sports in the city of Kalamazoo" (*Gazette*). Names first associated with the 1886 organization included Robert W. Smith, Sig Folz, J. Boder, E.C. Taylor, C.G. Bullard, Julius Schuster, E.S. Rankin, L.W. Burke, Louis Rosenbaum, A.W. Murphy, Charles Schrier, Samuel W. Oxenford, D.M. Cohn, Oliver G. Hungerford, and William A. Doyle. With support from the association, Doyle and Hungerford, both still avid baseball players and by this time leading businessmen themselves, spearheaded an effort to build a professional new ballpark on what was then vacant land along the north side of Wheaton Avenue near

Davis Street in today's Vine Neighborhood. The two then put together a tough new team called the Kalamazoos that featured many of the best local and regional players; McKinney, Allen, Wood, Beach, Douglas, Whalen, Hare, Hycoop, and Townsend, et al. At last, Kalamazoo had all the makings of true championship baseball.

Opening Day 1886

Shortly before 2 o'clock on Friday afternoon, June 18th, a crowd gathered at the Michigan Central depot to welcome the Chicago baseball club to Kalamazoo for the opening game of the 1886 season, and the dedication ceremony for Kalamazoo's first "real" baseball park, located on Wheaton Avenue. Escorted by the Kalamazoo City Band, Hungerford and Doyle transferred the team by omnibus to the Burdick Hotel for dinner, then to the Wheaton Avenue field for the 3:30 pm game. Admission for the opening game was 50¢, and nearly a thousand spectators were on hand to witness, including many of Kalamazoo's most prominent citizens.



Kalamazoo baseball team, with manager Oliver Guy Hungerford (standing center) c. 1886

Kalamazoo Valley Museum photo

With the new grandstand filled to capacity, carriages loaded with spectators lined up on the high ground along Davis Street to watch, while youngsters climbed the nearby trees and peered through knotholes in the fences, just to catch a glimpse of the Kalamazoos at work. The Kalamazoo team enjoyed a successful opening season, with attendance at most games numbering nearly a thousand or more.

Kalamazoo Kazoos (1887)

1887 would prove to be a banner year indeed for Kalamazoo's leading baseball nine. With the success of the 1886 season, a stock company was formed and Kalamazoo's semi-pro team, now simply called the Kazoos, joined the newly formed Ohio State League. "Those were great days," recalled J. B. Trowbridge. "Kalamazoo played professional ball and had some of the greatest players in the country."



A.C. Buckenberger, c.1887

Oliver Hungerford's 1887 Kalamazoo team was managed by A.C. "Al" Buckenberger, a 5 foot 10 inch third baseman from Detroit, who was "a clean, hard hitter and a fast base runner... a gentleman of education and refinement who [played] ball because he [loved] it" (*Gazette*). "In the field," lauded the *Kalamazoo Telegraph*, "Buckenberger is very like Sam Barkley, the famous Pittsburg second baseman."



Thomas Flannigan, c.1887

Whalen, Beach, McKinney, Douglass, Wood, Hare, Townsend, Harrigan, Smith, Lyons, and Allen were all familiar names in baseball circles around Kalamazoo during the 1880s. For the 1887 Kazoos, however, Buckenberger and Hungerford recruited professional players rather than locals not only for their playing skills, but due to the extensive travel commitments required for league play.

Behind home plate was twenty-year-old William Fuller, already a veteran of several seasons in Greenville and Detroit and regarded by many as "the best catcher who ever visited here" (*Gazette*). Also catching was twenty-one-year-

old J.T. Dillon, a rookie from Boston and Duluth who was small in stature but had impressive skills as a fielder.

A.G. Watson, a twenty-two-year-old from Massachusetts with "good speed, 'in' and 'out' curves, and a very effective 'drop' (*Gazette*), would be pitching for Kalamazoo, as would Joseph Vogel, a twenty-five-year-old left-hander "with good speed, all the curves and excellent command of the ball" (*Gazette*).



William Allen, c.1887

Rounding out the "battery" (19th-century baseball lingo for the pitcher and catcher) was a local duo they called Kalamazoo's "giant battery;" catcher William Allen, a "fine formed rangy man" and "very muscular" (*Gazette*), and pitcher Thomas Flannigan, who at six-foot-one was "believed to be one of the best in the country" (*Gazette*).

In the infield was E.J. Stapleton, a twenty-three-year-old first baseman from Canada; George Rhue at second base, an Ohio native who spent several seasons in the southern leagues; Dick VanZant at third base, a six-foot import from Duluth; and a twenty-three-year-old shortstop named William Otterson from Allegheny, Pennsylvania. “Otterson, the short-stop,” stated the *Kalamazoo Telegraph*, “is said to be a lightning ball snatcher. Those who have seen Messrs. Stapleton, Rhue, Buckenberger and Hungerford practice say they have never seen finer playing made.”

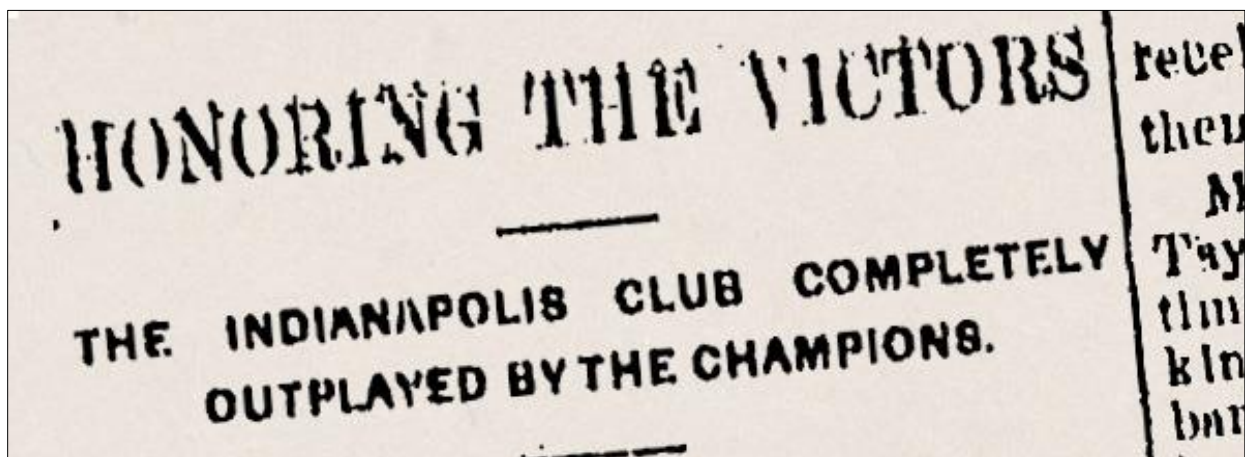
“On warm afternoons now that portion of the team already here indulge in practice at the grounds. The work they do has been witnessed by traveling men well posted, and they say the Kalamazoo team will rank with the very best.”

—*Kalamazoo Daily Telegraph*, 15 March 1887

Aside from the out-of-town professionals, there were a few select locals who rounded out the 1887 team. Taking care of the outfield was Jobe Hycoop, a first-year rookie left-fielder from Kalamazoo, who was “a very sure catcher and a hard left-handed batter” (*Gazette*), plus team founder Ollie Hungerford in center field, also from Kalamazoo and “always regarded as one of its greatest ball players” (*Gazette*). “Kalamazoo’s favorite player” (*Gazette*) and team co-founder Bill Doyle did not join the team due to business commitments that kept him from traveling, although he would make “guest appearances” at home games from time to time.

1887 State Championship

After a successful 107 game season with a 73-34 record, the Kazoos topped the league in 1887, ultimately defeating the champion Indianapolis team on the Wheaton Avenue grounds by a score of 5-3 to win Kalamazoo’s first ever state league title.



Kalamazoo Gazette, 30 September 1887

Tri-State League (1888-1889)

The following year, the Ohio League became the Tri-State League (Ohio, West Virginia, Michigan), but this time the Kalamazoo team didn't hold up so well and was forced to disband before the end of the season. In 1889, the first Michigan State League was organized, but Kalamazoo again saw very little success and was replaced by Flint in mid-season. Kalamazoo returned to independent play for the next five years while the league itself collapsed completely.

By 1890, the first "golden era" of baseball in Kalamazoo had come to an end. W.A. Doyle remained a contractor for many years and later managed the Kalamazoo Telephone Company until about 1898 before moving west to join the Alaska gold rush. Oliver Hungerford went on to become the proprietor of a series of well-respected billiard rooms in Kalamazoo, which he operated well into the nineteen teens.

"I think the game is easier today than it used to be twenty years ago. In those days the insufficient protection of the gloves caused the hands to swell to double their usual size. I used to get a piece of beefsteak and put it inside of the glove. This served to moisten my hands and served also as a protection."

—Charlie Ganzel, *Detroit Free Press*, 3 April 1904

Continuing Research

Like many of our Local History essays, this article is by no means a definitive study; rather it may be viewed as a work-in-progress. If you have new information, corrections, or items to share, please contact the author or the Local History Room.

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Written by Keith Howard, Kalamazoo Public Library Staff, 2013.

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